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ABSTRACT

Varied aspects of Swedish Distance Education are described in this report, which is based primarily on an evaluation that analyzed student background, study problems, student use of and attitudes towards distance aids, study results, and the psychological consequences of distance education. Emphasis is on an investigation of distance education students who began their studies in the academic year 1974-1975 and on a follow-up study in spring 1979, though some additional studies are discussed. The components of the evaluation program are outlined, and a short history examines how distance education functions at Swedish universities. Some of the main results of the evaluation are listed, together with course completion rates and the results of a study of 120 distance education teachers. Main conclusions are then discussed, including the overall conclusion that the decentralized Swedish model for distance education seems to have functioned very well. Nineteen references are listed. (LMM)

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Distance education in Swedish universities

Birgitta Willén

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During the last two decades we have had a lot of reform of higher education in Sweden. In recent years one of the official aims has been to increase the accessibility of higher education (Dahllöf, Kim & Willén, 1978). This includes providing adults, who work full-time and live away from the university towns, with opportunities for recurrent education. Distance education and various forms of decentralized education as well as part-time courses can be seen as means.

Distance education at the Swedish universities began in the academic year 1973-74 as experimental activities. The Swedish model is highly decentralized. The responsibility for carrying out distance education rests with the individual university departments, which at the same time organize other forms of university education. The distance program is based mainly on self-studies as are traditional university studies in general. The distance courses are offered at a 'slow pace', which means that one semester's standard course is offered over two semesters.

The general design of the distance programme has been summarized by Willén & Dahllöf (1979; 32-33) in the following way:

> '...although the basic model may be said to come close to traditional correspondence education, it should be emphasized
>
> – that the programme is mainly based on self-study as in traditional university studies in general
>
> – that the same textbooks are used as in ordinary university courses and
>
> – that the same examinations are held, both as regards form and contents.

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As in correspondence education, supplementary materials are used mainly in the form of

- written study guides, commenting upon textbooks
- assignments to be sent to the university at regular intervals.

The following special aids play an important role in bridging the distance and in increasing teacher-student contacts:

- meetings at the university at least three times per term
- audio-cassettes (TV-cassettes have seldom been used)
- telephone service.

The telephone service means that the head teacher or the tutor has a telephone time on certain days of the week, during which the students can give him a call. The teacher then calls back. Compared with other countries, the Swedish method is unique, as it makes considerable use of the telephone as a distance teaching aid. In contrast to the Open University in England, the Swedish model is much more decentralized and does not make use of radio and television broadcasting.

In Sweden, correspondence education at secondary school level has been organized by Hermods since the end of the 1800's. At first, the available courses were mainly commercial ones. The activities gradually expanded. In the 1950's, Hermods was granted the right of examination in secondary school subjects. Even so, the number of applicants decreased rapidly during the 1970's and Hermods found itself in financial difficulties; in 1975, they were taken over by the Swedish Government.

From my point of view, it is important to mention the fact that Hermods has organized correspondence courses at university level since the beginning of the 1950's. These courses originated in an increased need for English teachers, following a government bill in 1950 which made English a compulsory subject from the fifth grade of the comprehensive school. Hermods' courses in academic subjects were based on a correspondence component and oral tuition during the summer months. Up to 1973, 16,563 students had enrolled for Hermods' university courses. Only 23 percent (3,809) passed their examinations; a further 10 percent completed both the correspondence course and the summer course but did not take their examinations. The large number of drop-outs is puzzling, especially as most of those who enrolled already had experience in higher education, most of them being teachers in the Swedish school system. I have been unable to find any information or discussion about this low pass-rate.

EVALUATION

The evaluation programme

Distance education and the evaluation of the experimental activities commenced simultaneously. In the evaluation of distance education, my goal has been to present as comprehensive a picture as possible, by attempting to cover a number of different aspects of the experimental activities which I considered to be of importance. My point of departure was partly founded upon a basic view of education as an open system with important links to the surrounding society (Willén and Dahllöf, 1979; Willén, 1981; and Keegan, 1983).

The evaluation devoted much effort to an analysis of different student aspects such as background; study problems; the use students make of distance aids and their attitudes to these; study results and the social and psychological consequences of distance education. The main part of the evaluation was an investigation of distance students who began their studies in the academic year 1974-75. The work and attitudes of teachers were also studied. The evaluation programme also included some special studies. In figure 1, I have outlined the various components of the evaluation programme.

Some of the results obtained during the process of evaluation suggested that a follow-up investigation of the groups under study would provide further valuable information; a follow-up investigation was carried out during the spring term 1979 (Willén 1981).

Based upon my evaluation and practical experiences I will now give a short description of how the distance education at Swedish universities functions. During the year 1974-75 when I evaluated distance courses there were 41 courses offered at Swedish universities; today there are around 300.

Sweden is a small country with only 8 million inhabitants. It is very sparsely populated, particularly in the north. The spatial distribution of those who enrolled in distance education, varied greatly from university to university. At least half of the distance students at Umeå University, in the north of Sweden, lived more than 200 km from Umeå, for example.

When planning Swedish distance education, special consideration has been given to those who are gainfully employed, have less prior education, are older and live comparatively far from the nearest place offering the same course in a different form. The evaluation has shown that, during the experimental period, we succeeded in recruiting students answering to these criteria (Table 1).

The educational background varies; about 20 percent of enrollees belong to the specific target group having lower formal educational background, compensated by work experience. The discussion of students with a lower educational background is to some extent complicated by the fact that some of the subjects included demanded special basic knowledge. It should also be noted that the proportion of teachers does not exceed 20 percent except in some of the sub-groups, especially behavioural sciences and the arts. The group of administratively oriented subjects is particularly interesting since it seems to attract people with lower educational background (probably civil servants in local communities) more often than the others.

As is shown in Table 1, 44 percent of the participants are women, with great variation between subject fields, from 78 percent in languages to 24 percent in the natural sciences.

Main results

It is not possible to discuss all the details in this survey, so I will comment upon some main results.

There were usually several interwoven motives for studying. A good proportion of those who said they studied for occupational reasons, also said they were interested in increasing their general knowledge. The occupational motive varied with age, being strongest between 25-44 after which it declined. General educational motives increased with age and teachers and students reading arts subjects more often than others said they studied for general educational reasons.

The greater number of students intended to study single subjects. Only 25 percent of the students intended or were considering taking the full degree course when they started their studies. This group comprised mainly younger students, students with only secondary school education and those reading administrative and economic subjects.

Almost two thirds of the students thought they would not have had any possibility of studying, had it not been for the distance courses.

In all, 78 percent of the distance students were employed, men more often than women. Of those reading languages (most often women), comparatively few were employed. The largest number of employed students was found in the administrative and natural science subject areas, where men were also over represented; more women did work in the home than did men.

At the commencement of studies, half of the distance students (more women than men), planned to spend at least 10 hours a week on their studies. After

the end of the distance courses, when students were asked how much time they had spent on studies, it turned out that only 34 percent had invested more than 10 hours per week. Nearly 10 percent more women than men spent more than 10 hours a week on their studies. It is also interesting to note that students without secondary school education had spent 10 hours or more per week on their studies, more than twice as much time as students who already had some experience of university education.

Almost all the students were satisfied with distance education as a study form and more than three quarters of the students considered the meetings to have been valuable (Table 2). Those with less prior education appreciated the meetings more than those with a higher educational background. One of the most central distance teaching aids was the telephone, which was used by all departments. Three quarters of the students called their teachers and most of these students received the help they required when they called.

Most other distance teaching aids used were written material such as reading instructions, selfcheck assignments, assignments for submission and study guides.

It is important to point out that students with a lower educational background, more than others, would have liked to see an increase in the use of the following aids: personal letters, telephone, conference telephone, study guides, reading instructions and taped lectures.

There was a marked need for components with a 'feedback' effect, such as the telephone, letters, study-circles and meetings. However, students who had numerous meetings at the university did not request these to the same extent as other students. TV and radio were also listed as alternative 'feedback components', but students were less interested in these than in the above aids.

The demand for the use of aids with a feedback effect has also been noted by Kelly (1981a) and Kelly and Millard (1982) among the students of Open University. Caron found the same:

> It does at least seem clear that student support helps, for when the Teleuniversité offered language courses without any formal support, the proportion of drop-outs was higher than in other courses. However, this does not mean all students need the same level of support. ... students would receive more or less intensive support depending on their needs. (1982: 147)

The students were largely satisfied with their teachers' ability to fulfil their assignments during the meetings.

Many distance students, specially women, have stressed the psychological

and social aspects of distance education. More women than men, for example, said that their self-esteem had increased because they had succeeded with their studies. This was especially true for women without prior experience of academic studies.

Course completion rates

The completion rates were surprisingly high, at least by Swedish standards. Sixty-five percent of the study group had completed their studies successfully after three terms. And the pass-rates for the group with lower educational background was as good as the others.

Five years after the commencement of distance studies, the number of passes had risen from 65 percent to 76 percent, which proves that a number of students return to complete their studies after a long break.

The teacher study

The most interesting thing about the teacher study (N=120) is that its main finding generally support the results from the student survey. The teachers' views on the choice of suitable aids is in agreement with the opinions of the students. Almost half of the teachers considered that the contact with distance students was better than contact with regular students. The telephone contact possibly contributed to this. But distance education has implied new work assignments for teachers. The following changes were noted: more supervision and more personal contact, changed working hours, greater production of teaching material, more administration and more planning.

SOME MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The overall conclusion so far is that the decentralized Swedish model for distance education seems to have functioned very well. After the period of experimental activities with distance education, the form has been retained. There was almost no interest from politicians, planners or teachers to have a special higher education unit for distance education such as a Swedish version of the Open University.

In the evaluation we carried out, it is very clear that the target group for distance education is very heterogeneous, similar to that found at other distance education operations at university level nowadays.

I want to emphasize the importance of noting meaningful differences between the sub-groups, especially when a systematic trend is obvious. In the current literature in this area, there is a tendency to characterize distance students as though they were a homogenous group and this is used to support the theory of the independent and autonomous learner (Moore, 1973;

Wedemeyer. 1978). According to Moore, independent learning or teaching is an educational system in which the learner is autonomous, and separated from his teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print, electronic means, or some other non-human medium; the autonomous student is described as a person who knows how to proceed through each of the learning events.

The opinion that the majority of distance students are autonomous, and for this reason choose this particular form of education, is not supported by the investigations which have been carried out. On the contrary, it is often practical reasons which have driven the student to choose this form of education. My evaluation clearly shows that most of the students had no choice, as no other form of education was available in the place where they lived, or that it was impossible for them to participate in other forms of education because of family or occupational reasons.

My data shows that distance students at the university do not constitute a special group compared to other adult students at the university. The extension of this discussion, suggests that it could be to the detriment of students if one were to hypothesize that they are autonomous learners who know how to proceed. Such an opinion could lead the planner and the teacher not to take the needs and capabilities of the students sufficiently into account when organizing education. O'Donnel & Daniel have also pointed out that the first myth about the adult student which must be dispersed is 'that adults neither want nor need help in setting goals, planning programs, defining objectives or sharpening learning skills. Experience, the great teacher, will ensure these steps occur' (1979; 6). Houle (1964) expressed similar thoughts as far as the problem of drop-outs was concerned, namely that many adults do not know how to learn and therefore need much help at the beginning of their studies. Many investigations show that students who choose distance education are dependent on being able to be flexible in their studies.

I wish here to stress the fact that there is a large variation in students' ability to cope with the study material (see e.g. Marton & Willén, 1972) and also that there are distinctive differences between people in terms of their subjective conceptions of learning (Säljö, 1979; 443). Therefore it is very important to accept the fact that different students need different study structures and supportive measures; these must be established quickly. Problems also arise in as much as the student's possibilities of studying are affected by other activities concerning work and the family. Kelly (1981b) has found the same situation among the students at the Open University in England. Thus, it is a question of individualization of teaching and I would like to make it clear that this need cannot be met by TV or radio programmes alone, however, excellent they may be.

CONCLUSION

In the decentralized Swedish model the contact between student and teacher is central. Meeting at the university and using the telephone have been the main methods of establishing contact. This is also the most common method in the other Nordic countries and in Australia (Dahllöf, 1977). As well, effective personal counselling plays a central part in the study situation, especially at university level.

In summary the decentralized model used in Sweden and Australia has certain advantages which should not be overlooked.

The contact – feedback between student and teacher in the decentralized model is simple and uncomplicated. This can be seen from the point of view of both teacher and student. The student has often one teacher during the entire period of the course, whom he or she can contact by telephone or during the meetings at the university regarding all types of problems. For the teacher, who has planned the course and developed the learning material, contact with the student means that he or she can get direct information about how the course is functioning. In addition the model provides a framework within which there are excellent possibilities of individualizing and differentiating education. In the Swedish model the drop-out rate also seems to be no higher than among the ordinary university students, and the pass-rates are extremely good.

For the students it is very important that the distance courses are identical, regarding content and pass requirements with the courses taken by full-time regular students, as the students then have the possibility of choosing different educational study-forms at the university at different times and, indeed they do so (Willén, 1981).

It is important to emphasize that in Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, we have never questioned, or even discussed, whether distance education should be considered basically different from other forms of education.

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Investigated group/source of information	Method of investigation. Main variables.
University administration	A. Information to the general public B. Entrance requirements, Principles C. Home town of the applicants who have not been accepted and of the distance students
Departments	A. Interview with the head teacher. Planning. Choice of teachers. Method. Examination B. Drop-outs C. Use of telephone. (5 departments in Umeå) Registration of telephone calls. D. Questionnaire after one year of distance teaching. Use of different distance overbridging aids. Attitudes. Use of different examination forms. Opinion of distance teaching and distance students. Pedagogical effects on traditional teaching. E. Interview, with head teacher Students' study results
Those who asked for information but did not enroll (Umeå)	A. Telephone interview/Questionnaire Background data including educational background and place of abode. Opinion of distance studies. Reason for not registering. Do they intend to begin distance studies later? Which people began distance studies later?
Applicants who were not accepted	A. Questionnaire to the university administration Background data including place of abode and previous education.
Distance students	A. Questionnaire at the beginning of distance studies: Background and Motive for studying. Professional and work situation. Family situation. Support from environment. Amount of time intended to be spent on studies. B. Interview with distance students (pilot study) C. Questionnaire upon completion of studies: Motive for studying. Actual amount of time spent on studies. Obstacles in the way of studies. Use of and attitude to distance over-bridging aids. Attitudes to examination and teaching aids. General opinion of distance education.
Special investigations	A. Distance education and other extra-mural university education in the northern region. B. Cooperation with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation's school in Brunnsvik. C. Evaluation of the radio-programme 'Distance- minutes' broadcast from Umea' in corporation with the TRU-committee.
Follow-up investigation five years after the commencement of studies	Questionnaire to distance students regarding a) attitude to distance studies b) occupational situation during the five-year period c) educational situation during the five-year period

Figure 1: Schematized overview of the component in the evaluation of Distance Education

SOURCE: Willén 1981.25. Fig 1.3

TABLE 1: Background data for panel (Percent within each sub-group)

	Total	Subject area*					
		L	A	Ad	S	E	N
Sex							
Women	56	22	44	75	51	75	76
Age							
– 24	4	1	–	2	1	11	6
25 – 34	42	33	37	46	54	41	48
35 – 44	33	36	33	33	27	33	33
45 –	21	30	30	19	18	15	13
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Educational background							
Lower than secondary	21	16	18	35	(15)	24	15
Secondary	33	38	(15)	35	20	43	30
Teachers	18	22	34	(6)	29	16	13
University	27	22	33	24	35	16	41
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	797	201	87	147	82	141	144

*

L = Language subjects
A = Art subjects
Ad = Administrativesubjects within in Social Sciences
S = Social Sciences
E = Economic subjects
N = Natural Sciences

TABLE 2: Examples of students' behaviour and attitudes. (Percent within each sub-group)

	T	Sex M	Sex F	Educ background Low*	Educ background Sec school	Age 25–34	Age 45–
Generally satisfied with distance education	90	88	90	92	89	87	90
Meetings have been worthwhile	77	79	76	82	81	74	82
Called teacher	72	71	74	75	70	70	76
Want more taped lectures	51	47	56	48	55	49	54
Want more telephone contact	46	46	52	48	54	47	38
Want more TV	29	29	28	31	26	27	32
N	797	448	349	167	261	336	166

* *Low = lower than secondary*